Sacred Places, Civic Purposes

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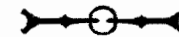
Should Government Help Faith-Based Charity?

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Maintaining Legitimacy: Church-Based Criticism as a Force for Change

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Churches are not always on the side of progress, a fact verified by George Kelling's chapter and my own experience. I lived for a period on the South Side of Chicago during the early 1970s, when many of the major African American churches were very closely allied with the Daley machine. During that time community activists made a concerted effort to desegregate Chicago's trade schools; it was a particularly important goal because it was necessary to attend a trade school in order to get into a trade union. The churches, however, supported the Daley machine indirectly by refusing to openly support the desegregation effort.

The dangers of church involvement in reform are not limited to Chicago. In the book *The Color of School Reform*, Jeffrey Henig and others discuss the role of black churches in school reform in four cities—Atlanta, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Detroit—from 1960 to 1980.[1] They point out that in earlier periods, when whites controlled the public school system in those cities and teachers were predominantly white, black churches were strong supporters of reform efforts. Over time, however, those school systems became increasingly important sources of jobs for blacks. As a result, large black middle-class churches, many of whose parishioners were teachers or, more generally, government employees, often sided with the teachers' unions in strongly opposing reform.

Even in Boston, the home of one of the most highly acclaimed examples of a successful partnership of religious and community leaders to reduce youth violence, the role of the church is not as unqualifiedly positive as one might initially think. Reverend Eugene Rivers's work with the Ten Point Coalition focuses on a small neighborhood with twenty-eight churches, many of which are storefront churches. The vast majority do not serve people who live there; the churches are there because the rent is cheap. As a result, disagreement has arisen among the churches and others in the community about the direction the community should take. Because the churches enjoy the low rents, they sometimes have opposed economic development initiatives that would bring new businesses into the neighborhood and thereby raise rents.[2]

Churches are complicated institutions with multiple goals and varied interests. At times their goals may conflict with the public good. I say that as a strong

proponent of church and religious community involvement in society's problems. We need to expand the policy options available, and the story of the Ten Point Coalition and many others demonstrate that the churches, despite their necessarily complicated agendas, can act as a force for needed change.

We have not made a lot of progress in dealing with poverty over the last decade in this country. We have not made a lot of progress in dealing with single-parent households. We have not made a lot of progress in dealing with inner-city schools. Those are the factors that the political left typically has pointed to as the root causes of crime. Yet we *have* made enormous progress in reducing crime. The subway example offered by Kelling suggests how important it is to look outside the box and think about solutions that may not necessarily be associated with root causes.

At the moment everybody is aglow with the need to partner with everybody else, as if partnering alone can solve the world's problems or single-handedly reduce youth violence. The Ten Point Coalition's partnership with the police in Boston often has been held up a model. But there is very little discussion in the research literature about the nature of such partnerships, what their purpose is, and what their limits are.

What the Ten Point Coalition, along with others, has accomplished in Boston is to get the police to focus on the small number of youths who truly are a problem and to stop harassing the large numbers of inner-city minority young people who are not. When the police act in a way that is consistent with the community's interests, the coalition publicly supports them. When the police do not, the coalition is more than willing to expose them to a rain of public criticism.

So it is a peculiar partnership, one that has changed the way the police (and other elements of the criminal justice system) and the inner-city community relate to each other. In its role as intermediary between the two parties, the Ten Point Coalition strives for balance between the community's desire for safe streets and its reluctance to see its children put in jail, and it does so in a way that offers an "umbrella of legitimacy" to the police in exchange for the fair and just exercise of their power. They support the police when the police act appropriately. But the coalition's very effectiveness rests on its willingness to criticize any police behavior that falls outside the bounds. Indeed, members of Boston's religious community—led by Rivers, who always is willing to exercise a prophetic voice and to speak truth to power—have at times been among the most vocal and publicized critics of the police department, even after the two parties became strong and long-standing partners in the battle against youth violence.

For example, a Boston street minister of color was arrested in the middle of a fight that he was trying to break up. He was out of collar, and the police did

not realize that he was a minister and ignored him when he said that he was. Rivers was vocal in the press about the importance of investigating the matter and holding the police accountable for the minister's unfounded arrest. His statements were essential to maintaining his credibility. Had he not openly criticized the police, many in his community would have assumed that he had been bought off, that his silence was repayment of a debt.

The lesson of the Boston experience, along with that of other cities, is this: in the struggle against crime, the police cannot go it alone; they need the cooperation of community leaders. Such partnerships help reduce youth violence and, equally important, delineate what constitutes legitimate police behavior. Police strategies can acquire legitimacy within inner-city communities only if the community harshly criticizes inappropriate police tactics while supporting appropriate tactics. Under those circumstances, ministers and police are ideal partners, because the clergy can maintain a prophetic voice even while actively partnering with the police. At the very least, the possibility that faith-based organizations in Boston have found an effective strategy for reducing youth violence, without severely and broadly compromising the civil liberties of inner-city residents, certainly is promising. But further research on and rigorous analysis of the complex nature of church-state partnerships in all cities is necessary if we are to truly understand the potential of faith-based organizations in reducing crime.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Henig and others, *The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

2. Omar M. McRoberts, *Saving Four Corners: Religion and Revitalization in a Depressed Neighborhood,* Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 2000.

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The Enforcer: The Role of Churches in Maintaining Social Control

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George Kelling discusses the destruction of the social institutions and relationships that have maintained social control by meting out negative sanctions to punish misbehavior and positive sanctions to reinforce conforming behavior. My firsthand experience with the function of sanctions to reinforce conforming val-

ues and behavior occurred during my coming of age in a small community called Palmers Crossing, near the town of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. My mother, Annie Ruth, who was also known as Miss Annie, was one of the reinforcers of the social norms in our tiny community.

For example, two young adults in the community who dated each other appeared drunk in public on a regular basis. The woman's nickname was Slingshot, and her boyfriend's nickname was Sa Poe. I think his name was Sam Poe, but his neighbors gave him the nickname Sa Poe. Whenever they passed our house drunk, they walked hurriedly to avoid Mother's sermonizing. More often than not, Mother saw them. "Oh, you're not going to slip past me. I see how drunk you are. Come here." Mother invited them to sit at our kitchen table, where she had them drink loads of black coffee; no sugar was allowed. Then she gave her standard lecture about how they should change their deviant ways and how they needed to make something of themselves and how "your mama is very disappointed in you and you don't want to hurt her by continuing to misbehave this way. You know this is not the way you were raised."

However, the small tightly knit communities that existed then have declined across the nation and with them the informal relationships and mores that exert control. Moreover, there is less consensus among community residents on what constitutes appropriate norms and who should enforce them. Kelling understands that it is not the big events that define an era or that are the most important underlying phenomena. Instead, it is the cumulative impact of the little events—the day-to-day sanctions of "Miss Annies" who remind individuals and groups of the traditional boundaries that the community has established for them. The informal mediators and enforcers of societal norms are critical to maintaining social control.

How does society maintain informal social control in an era when the formal institutions have declined and there are fewer informal arbiters of behavior? Those changes have come with massive changes in the way we relate to each other: we are less likely to know our neighbors; we do not dare to discipline a neighbor's children; teachers are hesitant to discipline students for fear that parents will object or file formal complaints against them. There has been a rapid deterioration of community values and with it decreased interest in participating in the reciprocal relationships—with their implicit obligations—that reflect shared values and responsibilities. That, indeed, is what constitutes the most serious problem in our communities.

My view is that we no longer have a uniform set of norms and values, no agreed-upon definitions of appropriate informal conduct. Nor is there a common language, a common understanding of concepts such as that evident in the 1960s when Americans collectively said that to deny some Americans the right